



My five cents...

A weekly column from Sen. Robert Nichols
by Sen. Robert Nichols, Senate District 3

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This week the Senate unanimously passed Senate Bill 5, a bill I authored that would address broadband access across the state. I appreciate the support of my colleagues and the leadership from the House author Rep. Trent Ashby.

Here are five things happening around your state:

1. Texas Department of Transportation offering Project Celebration grants

The Texas Department of Transportation is offering \$750 mini-grants to high schools for alcohol-free and drug-free parties after prom or graduation events. The funding comes through the Project Celebration program and schools must apply through TxDOT by April 16. The aim of Project Celebration is to keep students safe and alcohol-free throughout the school year and reduce the number of injuries and deaths caused by impaired driving. To participate, schools must notify the TxDOT Traffic Safety Specialist for their region. Events must follow CDC and school safety measures, including all-night lock-in events.

2. One million doses allocated to Texas this week

More than one million doses of COVID-19 were shipped to providers across Texas this week according to the Texas Department of State Health Services. The doses will go to 779 providers in 202 counties. Texas has now administered more than 10 million doses statewide. More than 6.8 million people have received at least one dose of the vaccine, and 3.5 million are fully vaccinated. Sixty percent of Texas seniors have received at least one dose and thirty percent of all eligible Texans have received one dose. Increasing rates of vaccination has helped drive down the number of new cases and people hospitalized with COVID-19. Current rates are at their lowest level since October.

3. Senate passes ERCOT reform bill

The Texas Senate unanimously passed Senate Bill 3 this week. This bill would overhaul the state's electricity market and would require all power generators, transmission lines, natural gas facilities, and pipelines to make upgrades for extreme weather events. The bill tasks the PUC and

the Railroad Commission to conduct on-site inspections to verify compliance. Senate Bill 3 would also ban indexed retail electric plans, like those offered by Griddy. Those customers saw soaring energy prices during Winter Storm Uri due to a spike in wholesale electricity pricing. Another component of the bill would create a statewide emergency alert system run by the Texas Department of Emergency Management that would be used in the event of future blackouts. It also directs TDEM to classify winter storms similarly to how hurricanes are categorized. The bill would also formalize the Texas Energy Reliability Council, which coordinates regulators, generators, and other industry partners to ensure the state's gas distribution for electricity needs are met. The bill now heads over to the Texas House.

4. T.L.L. Temple Foundation awards grants to school districts

School districts have faced many difficulties in the past year handling the COVID-19 pandemic while continuing to educate students. As such, the T.L.L. Temple Foundation has awarded grants to 12 school districts in East Texas totaling \$337,000, with \$30,000 going to each district. Schools can use the funds as they see fit with some using the funds to provide additional focused instruction and intervention support services to meet the needs of students. Learning disruptions from the coronavirus pandemic could have years long impacts on students and some students may have extensive learning loss since schools went virtual over a year ago. Though most students in East Texas are back in the classroom now, that learning loss will manifest in evaluations and assessments to come. It's important to identify at-risk students now so that schools can provide targeted instruction to fill learning gaps. Though this will take time, helping our children meet age-appropriate education goals is fundamental to the future success of the state.

5. TWC offers summer work readiness, STEM opportunities for underserved talent

The Texas Workforce Commission announced the Summer Earn and Learn (SEAL) and Explore STEM programs for summer 2021. These programs provide career guidance, hands-on learning, and work opportunities for students with disabilities aged 14-22. The SEAL program provides work readiness training to prepare students for successful employment. Students earn a paycheck during the program and acquire new skills, on-the-job-training, and professional experience.

Explore STEM is another initiative born from a partnership between TWC and institutions of higher education. Students explore careers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). Students with disabilities that participate in Explore STEM day camps attend lectures and presentations and participate in hands-on activities with visiting STEM professionals. This summer the program will be offered virtually.

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